

Treading Other Paths within Afro-Diasporic Contexts: Unilab Students' Experiences, Challenges, and Perspectives

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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss some of the processes that characterized the creation and consolidation of the University of International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (Unilab) in Bahia, as part of the expansion project of public higher education in Brazil that was implemented during the Lula presidency (2003–2010) and defined in the government's internationalization and regionalization project. To this end, I reviewed the literature and institutional documents from the past four years and analyzed observations of daily campus life. I highlight some challenges as well as possibilities for young international students, particularly young Africans from the five Portuguese-speaking countries, and for Brazilian nationals, too, which arise from the implementation of this public higher education expansion program in the Recôncavo Baiano region. Finally, I conclude with observations about the cultural diversity and social reality inherent to the context and discuss the conceptual and practical challenges and possibilities arising from that intercultural reality.

Keywords: intercultural; diaspora; higher education/Brazil

1. Introduction

This academic essay aims to review some of the processes that characterize the founding and consolidation of the University of International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB), more specifically the creation of the *Campus dos Malês*, in the Brazilian state of Bahia.¹ The harbor of our arrival is the city of São Francisco do Conde, located in the region known as “Recôncavo Baiano”² (named after the concave shape of Bahia's All Saints' Bay). The region's natural environment is characterized by mild salt waters, mangroves, and *massapé*³ soil. Historically, the Recôncavo Baiano was the gate of entrance for thousands of Africans coming to the region as slaves from several places in the African continent, from the 16th to the mid-19th centuries. In this context, it sounds ironic that

¹ This university was created by the Brazilian Federal Government program of Higher Education regionalization—i.e., to bring Higher Education Institutions to rural areas of Brazil. UNILAB has a distinct feature of promoting internationalization through cooperation with the five Officially Portuguese Speaking African Countries (PALOP). The *Campus dos Malês* is located in São Francisco do Conde (35,000 inhabitants), one of Brazilian municipalities with the highest percentage of black people, which is situated in the *Recôncavo Baiano* area, something unusual in many ways! However, the *Campus dos Malês* was established 650 miles away from UNILAB's headquarters, located in the “Maciço do Baturité” (Baturite Mountains), in the Ceará state.

² “Recôncavo Baiano” is the denomination of the region surrounding the bay known as “Baía de Todos os Santos” (“All Saints' Bay”), near the city of Salvador, Bahia's capital. The name “Recôncavo” derives from the concave shape of the bay. The “Recôncavo Baiano” area does not only include the coastland, but also the inlands in the bay. The municipalities that are part of the “Recôncavo Baiano” region include Amargosa, Santo Amaro, São Francisco do Conde, Nazaré, Maragogipe and Cruz das Almas (Souza 2013).

³ “Massapé” is silt composed mainly of clay, with very dark, sometimes black, coloration, very fertile and common in the coastal areas of the Northeast.

the first group of faculty members arrived at the newly created campus in May 2014, one day after 13 May, the date when slavery was definitively abolished in Brazil in the year of 1888. Two days later, on 16 May, the campus was officially inaugurated in the presence of former President Lula, who is considered the founder of UNILAB, which, however, did not yet have a name. Soon, we felt the call for historical coherence regarding the choice of a name for our campus. This coherence is related to the need for maintaining the memory of resistance, a resistance professed through the narratives of insubordination against political and historical hegemonic discourses. A resistance that exists in the narratives of strength sown in these fertile *massapê* lands as seeds that have developed strong and deep roots from which trees of resilience have been growing. The Oblivion Trees, where our ancestors were forced to turn clockwise before leaving the African continent to symbolically forget, are gone. Now, the trees, both metaphorically and physically, are trees of remembrance, bringing us memories of our struggle as African descendants in Brazil. Such memories were powerful, emerging during the arrival of young African men and women from the five African countries that have Portuguese as their official language (known by the Portuguese abbreviation of PALOPs).⁴

For many of these young students, arriving in Brazilian territory means a movement of historical redemption in comparison to their ancestors during the slave ships period. Today, they come to study, to share, to produce knowledge and to create scientific and cultural projects. At the end of their programs, they will take these skills, knowledge, and experiences back through the same trans-Atlantic route home to their places of origin, their baggage laden with what they came to seek in Brazil: professional qualification and other personal abilities to pursue change for a “better future.”

A symbolic and auspicious moment, indeed, that the campus inauguration festivities aligned with that historic day of 13 May 1888. In that moment on 14 May 2014, the Brazilian State seemed to return in time to accomplish what had been left unfinished for over a century: reparation for slavery. This was a symbolic moment of reparation of an ancestral debt towards both the former enslaved in Brazil, and the Africans on the continent. This was a moment of reparation for those Brazilians who, in past times, had produced the wealth of Brazil. Reparation for numerous young black men and women, rampantly poor, living in rural areas, still suffering from exploitation, from marginalization and impoverishment, either economic or social. The image would no longer be that of a group of black women, men, and children abandoned to their own fate, but instead one of people assisted by the state, which now recognizes the strength and the work of black people from Africa and from Brazil, and the economic and cultural wealth they brought to this nation. In 2011, UNILAB was born in Ceará and embarked on its mission described in chapter II of its by-laws, “Mission, principles and goals,” stated as follows.⁵

It seemed unavoidable that the choice for the campus name would be “Campus dos Malês”, a name which in the Brazilian context represents the history of struggle in the city of Salvador and the *Recôncavo Baiano* region.⁶ This region was the scene of many rebellions and revolts carried out by the enslaved

⁴ To the present day, the university conducts the selection process of applying students in these so-called partner countries (Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe) with the support of the local Brazilian embassies. There has been the intention to extend these partnerships to Anglophone and Francophone African countries through special selection programs such as the PEC-G (Undergraduate Students Exchange Agreement Program). The PEC-G is one of the first and most important international students exchange programs operating in Brazil ([Brasil, Governo Federal 2016](#)).

⁵ Art. 8: The objective of UNILAB is to provide higher education, develop research in the diverse fields of knowledge, and promote the university extension, having as its specific institutional mission to train human resources in order to contribute to the integration between Brazil and the other countries participating in the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (CPLP), in particular the African countries, as well as promote regional development, and cultural, scientific and educational exchange. Art. 9: UNILAB and its community of faculty members, administrative staff, and students aim at the creation, transmission, and application of knowledge to be integrated in teaching, research, and community extension programs, as well as the promotion of cultural, scientific and educational exchange, aiming at the regional, national and international development aligned with the quest for Social Justice. ([Unilab 2017a](#), p. 5; [2017b](#)).

⁶ See [Reis \(2000, 2003\)](#). In these works the Brazilian historian João José Reis who works the slave revolts in Bahia during the nineteenth century, in particular the Malês rebellion and its specificity and importance in the context of the African diaspora in the Americas.

Africans and Brazilians before and during the 19th century. One of the most important slave rebellions, still considered emblematic of the period, was the *Malês* Rebellion in Salvador, in January 1835.

The university affirmed, in this sense, a belonging and an identity committed to the struggle and resistance, outlined in the text of its Founding Decree and Bylaws, which establish UNILAB's institutional mission in terms of regionalization and internationalization. Adding to Regionalization, and Internationalization, UNILAB is committed to the principle of Integration. This is the tripod of UNILAB's mission. The vibrant enchantment of those who have been able to share this ambitious project was sparkling in the eyes of those present on the day the campus was inaugurated.

2. Distinct Cultural Environments and Youth Experiences

As stated before, the students started to arrive in early May, and the classes started in June 2014.⁷ The outlook presented at the time was of great expectation and challenges. One of these challenges was immediately manifest in the imminent alienation and cultural clash confronting those young people coming from diverse African countries.

In light of this situation, it seemed unavoidable to open up a dialogue with the arriving students, especially with foreigners. Why did we choose these people in particular? It was due to the concerns about the diverse cultural universe and youth experiences, and, in the same way, around the individual experience of leaving home for the first time to study in another region, federal state or in another country, knowing all the various challenges this situation could create. During the meeting with the freshmen, we reflected on the questions arising from the documentary “*Cartas para Angola*” (Letters to Angola),⁸ that deals with the exchange of letters between Brazilians and Angolans. Using these letters from the documentary as the point of departure, students were invited to share the impressions they had of the others, of their own countries, of their own places in society, and the places of the others, too. Each participant revealed their dreams, life's projects, challenges, and strategies.

As a dialogue facilitator, I started by congratulating everyone for initiating a new period in their lives, for seeking higher education at UNILAB, and for having accepted the challenge of leaving their homes to study in another country. These are choices that have to be applauded. Today, I would extend these congratulations also to the students, who left their homes within Brazil, this huge country of continental dimensions. The challenge started with the departure of each one of these young people to study far away from their homes. Soon, the challenge gained other dimensions as soon as these students were immersed in the university routine as well as in external social spaces, as for example the local community, churches, the spaces for recreation, the local market, and so on.

At that moment during our conversation, I used a metaphor that I would like to use again today (since we are talking about life experience), “home.” Leaving your home for another demands the discovery of the local ways of access and approach. Thus, let us discover, or better, let us create ways of getting closer one to each other. Of course, there are many paths to tread and different ways to know something, someone or somewhere. However, nothing equals the daily life experiences, narrated through the careful observation of local codes and meanings. The individual learning process begins through exchange, through sharing, through the quest for learning and teaching.

Everybody, in his/her own ways, started treading these new paths. Very soon, they were inserting themselves in the everyday life of São Francisco do Conde, beyond the university campus. It is needless to stress that this “insertion”, was not (it is never) an easy task. The easiness and the difficulties are posed to each person in different ways, despite the factors they have in common. Now, four years later, we have the information and data resulting from the experiences of senior students, which will help us

⁷ The activities related to Distance Learning were already started in 2013.

⁸ (Ruiz and Matos 2012).

to think more concretely and systematically through some of these challenges, and, in the same way, to draw conclusions for the future.

3. Daily Challenges

The contact between people from distinct cultural and social realities made me ask the following questions to foreign students: What did you imagine Brazil to be? For those coming from other Brazilian federal states, I asked: What did you think about Bahia state, and about the town of São Francisco do Conde? (to the ones coming from another Brazilian federal states). When they left their homes, either in rural areas, villages or cities, what did they expect from their new environment? What was happening in their personal imagination? These were the initial questions I suggested they never lose sight of. The encounter with cultural pluralities with distinct meanings and reality standards is not an easy task for any of us. Nevertheless, I consider it as a task of great wealth, because it presents great challenges.⁹

Higher Education Institutions are also spaces where conflicts erupt frequently. Of course, one would expect our multinational campus not to be different. Cultural diversity, ethnic differences (in this case, we have among our academic community people coming from several ethnic backgrounds), language differences, social class differences, diverse political alignments, and diverse racial, gender, religious and sexual orientation identities. Some of these conflicts could be exemplified in terms of existing world stereotypes. For example, initially the foreign students are generally identified as Afro-Brazilians while circulating in different social spaces, or cities in Bahia or other Brazilian States. Some are more often misidentified than others (maybe the Cape Verdean and São-Tomean students are less frequently mistaken for Afro-Brazilians than the Angolans, and the Bissau-Guineans). We keep thinking about and reflecting on these wrong perceptions. In addition, during the four years at UNILAB in São Francisco do Conde, we realized that all students coming from the African Continent were indiscriminately called “Angolans” by the local population. This generalization used to occur before, where the students would all be classified as “Africans”, with no attention being paid to their specific home countries, this was happening both inside and outside UNILAB.

Among the Brazilian students coming from different Brazilian states, or even the ones from the state of Bahia, stereotypes occur in terms of a general imagery of the “Brazilian” type. What effect do these generalizing stereotypes produce on the students in terms of their college experience and environment? How do they deal with them? Or, better, how do they understand them? What is it that brings us closer, and what is it that separates us?

Each country has its own cultural system, its cultural meanings, and its political and social organization. To be aware of the reality in which we are immersed in seems well advised. Inevitably, many of the Brazilian practices and cultural meanings are unfamiliar to foreign students. At the same time, many practices and cultural meanings are not shared among all foreign students either. This situation is not a problem per se, since it is what constitutes the basis for encounters with new meanings and life styles.

It is important to face the conflicts and overcome the obstacles, though one might wonder how that is possible. I think it is possible through permanent and sustained action that encompasses the very pillars upon which this institution was built. Obstacles can be overcome by conducting research, training projects and community extension actions that seek to understand who we are collectively and individually, and embracing our cultural and social identities and connections.

The new initiative “Observe-Unilab” (Observing Unilab) was launched recently. We are very optimistic about this action focusing on university campus life. Our expectations are that this action will contribute to an accurate and critical understanding of our diverse community, and from that,

⁹ See Malomalo, Fonseca and Badi (Malomalo et al. 2015), De Gusmão (2008), De Gusmão (2012), Langa (2012), Silva and Morais (2012) and Subuhana (2009) on the daily life and challenges faced by African students in Brazilian public universities.

we expect to improve the institutional policies of student assistance. I would like to highlight that, by Student Assistance Policies, I not only refer to issues of financial support (financial assistance for food and housing), but, more importantly, also to policies aimed to secure the students' retention in the college.

4. The Context of the Expansion of Public Higher Education in Brazil

Returning to the subject of Public Higher Education and its expansion in Brazil, I would like to point out briefly that many steps were taken by the Brazilian government for us to be able to participate in this dialogue. One of those steps was the adoption of the Federal Universities Expansion Program (REUNI) in 2008. Paving the way for REUNI was the adoption of Affirmative Action policies, policies that apply racial and social class criteria for entrance into Brazilian public universities.

These political initiatives effectively opened the university doors to a particular part of Brazil's population and more precisely to a segment of Brazilian youth that previously did not have access to Higher Education as a possible horizon for them. To close this point of our discussion, I would like to stress that these actions resulted from the demands, propositions and actions that the social movements, in particular the Brazilian Black Movements (Movimento Negro), have historically been making. Other examples include the approval of the 10.639 Law in 2003, which makes it mandatory to teach Afro Brazilian history and culture, and African History in the country's schools. Later on, this law was modified, becoming the 11.645 Law to include the mandatory teaching of Amerindian history and culture. These laws opened up a vast field of demands and needs regarding implementation, consolidation and quality of their application. To accomplish these needs and demands, the curricula of teacher training were given priority. However, in general, the need to carefully revise the Brazilian historiography and social sciences regarding their traditional ways of thinking and narrating the history of the Brazilian nation was neglected.

Regarding this point, the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) in Salvador, which was one of the first universities to adopt Affirmative Action and the REUNI Program, stands out as a positive exception. UFBA increased and racially diversified its body of students. It is easy to see, feel the presence, and talk to Afro-Brazilian and Amerindian students on the UFBA campus. During the mid-1990s, the body of students was much more homogenous: white and upper middle class in the vast majority. There were black and poor students at the time, but in very reduced numbers. Turning to the subject of the public university and its expansion, after more than ten years of this initiative, many of the arguments which were used by those opposed to Affirmative Action policies, emphasizing the expected failure of these policies, had definitively been proven wrong. Naysayers had argued that adopting such policies would inevitably lead to a reduction in educational quality and less appeal to the principles of merit in student admission decisions. Another example for this pessimism is the discourse that, by adopting racial criteria, intolerance, racism, and the racial conflicts would escalate in Brazil. Those kinds of predictions have been wrong. Nonetheless, the changes in Brazilian Higher Education are not the panacea for all the problems that blind us to the problems that still characterize the reality of education in Brazil. As an example, many children and adolescents are not even able to finish the early stages of education in order to get access to high school (ensino médio) or university education.

Outside the college realm, many black and poor youth in the large Brazilian cities are not enrolled in school and continue to be victims of violence and racism. The statistics of violence in Brazil continue to indicate alarming rates of violent deaths, in particular in the impoverished shantytowns of the large cities. The black youth in the poorest areas are killed more frequently during brutal police raids, brutality which is always officially justified by the authorities and hardly ever prosecuted let alone punished, because these young black men are always depicted as "criminals" and "offenders".

This analysis leads to the critical point that racism, sexism, and violence (in its different aspects, including structural violence) are structural forces at work in Brazil. Brazilians are living in a decade of many changes, victories and successes, but also of losses and setbacks, too. What all this has to do with college experience becomes clear in light of the founding principles of UNILAB, which are enshrined in

a set of educational policies and International Relations, in particular educational cooperation with the five PALOP. In this regard, we could not omit in our analysis the need to relate local issues—concerning our everyday life—to broader (albeit conjectural) societal issues. Finally, we affirm our belief that the process of change, of improving educational policies, will not be easily dissipated, notwithstanding the conservative turn Brazil is experiencing now.

5. Closing Remarks

To be considered successful in completing their Higher Education journey, the students need not only acquire a diploma at the end of their program, but they also need a broad understanding of their existence as social beings, as citizens. I think Brazilians are learning to do this, as are other nationals throughout the world as well. I have been following the debates regarding college life for a few years now, even before UNILAB, at other institutions where I had worked before UNILAB, through participation in actions aiming to support the black and the poor youth seeking access to Higher Education. Thus, it is in the realm of college life, or better, in the realm of this college experience that we have identified clues for improvement and have been able to produce knowledge. Moreover, a University focusing on International Exchange and cooperating with African countries can contribute in many ways to knowing better and looking closer into at least part of the huge African continent. We in Brazil have a unique relationship with this continent, and we need to positively build the imagery concerning the place and the role of Afro-Brazilians in the formation of the Brazilian Nation. The presence of African students has provoked various distinct views and interests, ranging from the exotic gaze and prejudice, through admiration, curiosity, and the desire to learn more about the history, the cultures, the ways of life of the diverse African countries. In addition, the whole experience has made us reflect more deeply on racism and sexism, which has structured Brazilian society to a large extent.

In this way, the founding of the University of International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB) inserts itself in the context of Public Higher Education Expansion in Brazil. This expansion was made possible by the increase in investments for the areas of sciences, technology and culture, as well as the growth in the number of Federal Higher Education Institutions (through expansion of existing public universities and the creation of new ones). This was one of the central axes of Brazilian government educational politics during the Lula presidency,¹⁰ which also indicates an encounter between the Brazilian nation and its history, as long as these politics, and these new institutions, among them the UNILAB, aim to become centers for research and teaching for Brazilian students in interaction with students from other Portuguese speaking countries in Africa. Thus, UNILAB, an institution prominently inserted in the context of Brazil's Internationalization of Higher Education, attends to the goal of promoting South–South cooperation, by acting through the perspective of solidarity, mutual benefits, and valuing the potential for exchange and mutual learning among the participating countries.

The creation of the University of Afro-Brazilian Lusophone International Integration is composed of a set of actions being executed in Brazil based on governmental policies of international cooperation guided by the principles of collaboration with the countries of the global South. Among actions in the education area, UNILAB is responsible for greater outreach of other epistemologies in relation to the economic, political and social hegemony of the north.

The pedagogical projects include curricular proposals that have, in general terms, the objective to construct epistemological approaches from viewpoints constituted among societies with lived experiences of colonization and the colonialism. In the main bibliographical references of essential disciplines, there is an explicit effort in guiding other theoretical and methodological references, produced from the global south experience.

¹⁰ See [Saraiva \(2002\)](#) on the Foreign Policy of the Lula Government.

Although it was not the focus of our intervention in this work, it is evident that UNILAB, as well as other initiatives of this nature, are threatened in its continuity and potential, with the current Brazilian political situation of denial, freezing and setbacks, public policies for access to goods and services, such as access to higher education by populations that have historically been excluded from outside the area.

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